

THE GAGE GROUP

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
in August, 1981

THE GAGE GROUP

18, 24, and 30 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architects: Holabird and Roche
Louis Sullivan (for the facade of 18 South Michigan Avenue)

Constructed: 1899-1900

In 1898, Stanley R. McCormick commissioned Holabird and Roche to design three buildings at what are now 18, 24, and 30 South Michigan Avenue for the wholesale millinery firms of Gage Brothers and Company, Edson Keith and Company, and Theodore Ascher and Company. The Gage Company requested that Louis Sullivan be commissioned to design the facade of the building it would occupy, the northernmost of the three. This turned out to be Sullivan's penultimate commission for a major building and it was, according to architectural historian Carl Condit, "the first structure from Sullivan's hand to take its form throughout the facade from the steel frame that supports it." Because of the facade that Sullivan designed, the Gage Building has received more attention than the Ascher and Keith buildings, and the three structures are frequently referred to collectively as the Gage Group.

The Clients

Stanley R. McCormick was the youngest of the three sons of Cyrus Hall McCormick, the inventor of the reaper. After graduating from Princeton University and attending law school at Northwestern University for one year, young McCormick spent a year managing his family's real estate interests. Among these holdings was the property at what is now 18-30 South Michigan Avenue, which Cyrus McCormick had acquired in 1864 and later gave to his youngest son. Two buildings occupied the site in 1898 when Stanley McCormick and John C. Fetzer, an agent for the McCormick family, arranged to redevelop the property with three buildings to be leased to three of Chicago's leading wholesale milliners.

The Ascher, Keith, and Gage companies were well established in Chicago by 1898. Theodore Ascher had arrived in the city in 1868 and in 1873 founded the firm of Ascher, Bernard and Company, wholesale milliners. In 1891, he purchased his partner's share of the business which then continued as Theodore Ascher and Company. Edson Keith had come to Chicago in 1854 and in 1860 joined his brother Osborn R. Keith and Albert E. Faxon in a wholesale millinery concern. When Faxon retired five years later, the firm became known as Keith Brothers. In 1879, Osborn Keith withdrew from Keith Brothers to form his own company which continued in business until 1884 when the two firms merged to become Edson Keith and Company. The Gage family had established their millinery business in Chicago prior to the fire of 1871, and Albert Seth Gage later boasted that after the fire he "was the first to have a new stock of goods in the city, using his 4-story residence as a store until he rebuilt."

The Ascher, Keith, and Gage companies all leased space in buildings on Wabash Avenue before moving to their new quarters on Michigan Avenue. Each firm wanted to occupy and control an entire building, and the McCormick property seemed an ideal location for the three milliners. Michigan Avenue was then developing into a prestigious boulevard: the Auditorium Building with its grand theater and hotel had opened in 1889; the Auditorium Annex (now the Americana Congress Hotel) had opened in 1893, and in that same year the Chicago Athletic Club had been completed just to the north of the McCormick property; the Art Institute had moved into its building on the east side of Michigan Avenue in 1894; and the Chicago Public Library had opened its new building a few blocks north in 1897. In addition, plans were being made to beautify the park land across Michigan Avenue from the McCormick site. Its proximity to these buildings and to the lakefront park caused one real estate journal to comment of the site: "The locality is considered among the best that could have been selected for large establishments devoted to the wholesale millinery trade."

McCormick and the three milliners entered into ten-year leases commencing on January 1, 1899. The annual rents were set at a percentage of the combined cost of the land and the buildings. Although McCormick had commissioned Holabird and Roche to design the three buildings, the Gage company agreed to pay additional rent to cover the cost of employing Louis Sullivan to design the facade of its building. An 1899 issue of the construction magazine *Brickbuilder* stated:

They did so because they thought it would benefit their business in an equal degree. They put an exact commercial value on Mr. Sullivan's art, otherwise he would not have been called in.

The three facades that resulted from this collaboration between Holabird and Roche and Louis Sullivan demonstrate the architects' different approaches to skyscraper design and exemplify their individual contributions to the development of the Chicago school of architecture.

The Architects

Holabird and Roche were the most prolific architects of the Chicago school; their office buildings of the 1890s represent the mainstream of that movement's straightforward, functional approach to design. These buildings vigorously express in their uniform cellular facades the geometry of the supporting skeleton frame. Ornament is kept to a minimum; this was most often the result of financial considerations but it served to place these buildings in the mainstream of the development of modern architecture. To Sullivan, on the other hand, ornament was an indispensable part of architecture, and he devoted himself to creating an original and "organic" system of architectural ornamentation. The Gage Building combines the simply articulated cellular facade characteristic of Holabird and Roche's work during the late 1890s with the luxuriant ornament Sullivan was creating at the time.

William Holabird and Martin Roche began practicing together in 1881 while both were still in their twenties. Both men had previously worked for William LeBaron Jenney, the Chicago architect whose development of skeleton-frame construction made the modern skyscraper possible. During the early years of their partnership, Holabird and Roche primarily designed apartment and commercial buildings in Chicago and Evanston. The twelve-story Tacoma Building, completed in 1889 at the northeast corner of LaSalle and Madison streets (demolished in 1929), was the firm's first tall office building in downtown Chicago. It was followed by several more downtown office buildings, including the Pontiac (542 South Dearborn Street), the southern addition to the Monadnock (Dearborn and Van Buren streets; designated a Chicago Landmark on November 14, 1973), the Old Colony (407 South Dearborn Street; designated a Chicago Landmark on July 7, 1978), and the Marquette (140 South Dearborn Street; designated a Chicago Landmark on June 9, 1975). In their 1894 Marquette Building, Holabird and Roche established the basic cellular pattern that they would employ in the design of most of their office buildings through the first decade of the twentieth century.

The facade of the Marquette consists of wide rectangular windows set into a grid-like pattern of strong uninterrupted vertical piers and recessed horizontal spandrels which are less emphatic than the piers because they are discontinuous across the facade. Carl Condit has written of the Marquette:

The street elevations. . .set it off from all its predecessors. The windows are long rectangular openings extending throughout the width of the baysThe general impression of the street elevations of the Marquette is that of a pattern of large transparent areas set in narrow frames of piers and spandrels.

Once this basic pattern had been established, Holabird and Roche repeated it with variations in most of their office buildings for the next sixteen years. This efficient system of office design was suited to Chicago's pragmatic developers and it resulted in numerous easily recognizable Holabird and Roche buildings in downtown Chicago, including the Gage Group.

Condit has summarized the achievement of Holabird and Roche:

...they discovered the simplest utilitarian and structural solutions to the problems of the big urban office block, and out of these solutions they developed a perfectly rational and standardized form adaptable with minor variations to the conditions imposed by the commercial structure in a crowded urban area.

...Yet not only were they responsible for many structural and utilitarian innovations, but they also succeeded in developing the most effective architectonic expression of steel framing up to Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott Store.

Sullivan's later achievement in his masterful Carson Pirie Scott Store was undoubtedly influenced by his familiarity with the work of Holabird and Roche.

Sullivan had originally met William Holabird and Martin Roche in 1873 when, at the age of seventeen, he secured a job in the office of William LeBaron Jenney, where both Holabird and Roche were then employed. Sullivan remained in Jenney's office for only six months before leaving for Paris to continue his architectural training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. His stay at the noted French school was brief and he returned to Chicago in 1875. For the next several years he worked in various Chicago architectural offices. In 1879, according to several early accounts, Sullivan went to work for Dankmar Adler. Recent research indicates, however, that the two began working together in 1880. According to his autobiography, Sullivan became Adler's partner in 1880 and the following year the firm was renamed Adler and Sullivan. Architectural historian Paul Sprague and others have recently demonstrated that the partnership did not commence until 1882 and the name Adler and Sullivan was not used until 1883. The two men practiced together until 1895 when Adler, discouraged by the lack of commissions caused by the financial panic of 1893 and the subsequent depression, left the firm to become consulting architect and general sales manager of the Crane Elevator Company. Sullivan practiced alone until his death in 1924.

Like Holabird and Roche, Sullivan was interested in creating an appropriate and expressive form for the tall skeleton-frame building. The buildings he designed during the 1890s, both in partnership with Adler and on his own, represent his solution to that problem. Adler and Sullivan's first skyscraper, the Wainwright Building constructed in St. Louis in 1890-91, embodies the basic elements Sullivan considered appropriate for skyscraper design. The building rests on a two-story base above which rise seven uniformly treated office floors and a richly ornamented attic floor. Uninterrupted vertical piers mark the seven floors and give the building a pronounced verticality. The Wainwright combines the simple lines and rich detail that characterized most of Sullivan's office buildings for the remainder of the decade. Carl Condit has written of the design of the Wainwright:

This personal treatment of the elevations in a sculptural way reveals Sullivan's feeling for the tall building to be strictly subjective and somewhat at odds with what one might call the more neutral and empirical character of the main body of Chicago work. His approach might be characterized as the higher functionalism of psychological as well as utilitarian statement. The major progress of the Chicago school lay in the direction of an articulated wall that expresses the structural facts of interior framing. The classic statement of this intention is Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott Store, but a variety of experiments in form lay between the vertical movement of the Wainwright and the balanced structural articulation of the Carson building.

These "experiments" included the Schiller Building (later the Garrick Theater Building, 64 West Randolph Street; demolished in 1961), the Stock Exchange Building (30 North LaSalle Street; demolished in 1972), the Guaranty Building in Buffalo, New York, the Bayard Building in New York City, and the Gage Building. Of these, the Gage comes closest to the "balanced structural articulation" Sullivan achieved in the Carson store. The Gage Building consequently represents a major step in the development of one of America's foremost architects.

A Single Structure With Three Facades

The Ascher, Keith, and Gage buildings share a continuous steel frame and are structurally one large unit. A construction photograph taken while the frame was still partially exposed reveals that the structural piers at the junctures of the three facades are only slightly broader than the other columns. These wider piers support the weight of the brick party walls which were constructed so that they could be removed without disturbing the steel frame. Consequently, adjacent floors of the three buildings could be easily connected.

Originally the three buildings of the Gage Group were each to be six stories high; the two northern ones, to be leased to the Keith and Gage companies, were each to be sixty-five feet wide and the southern one, for the Ascher company, was to be thirty-eight feet wide. The Gage company later decided that it needed an additional, seventh, floor. As built, however, the Ascher was six stories high, the Keith seven, and the Gage eight. Four floors were added to the Gage in 1902, making it twelve stories high, and a seventh floor was added to the Ascher in 1971. The Keith and Gage buildings are each sixty-two feet wide, and the Ascher forty-four feet; all three are 160 feet deep.

The Ascher and Keith buildings are sheathed in red brick. The Ascher is two bays wide and the Keith three. The bays are filled by wide rectangular Chicago windows consisting of a central stationary pane of glass flanked on each side by a narrow moveable sash window. The piers separating the bays are continuous from the second through the top stories. The horizontal spandrels between floors are discontinuous and are nearly

flush with the piers. Spandrels and piers are balanced so that an equilibrium exists between horizontal and vertical members; the resulting cellular facades are among the most refined ever created by Holabird and Roche. Ornament was restricted to the ground floor, the cornice, and narrow bands at the window sills. The ground floors consisted of broad expanses of glass set into simply detailed iron frames, but these were destroyed as part of a 1952 "modernization." The original cornices have been removed, and simple parapets now crown the two buildings.

The facade of the Gage Building is cream-colored terra-cotta. Its general pattern is similar to those of the adjacent buildings: narrow piers and spandrels frame wide rectangular window openings. The Gage facade is, however, more subtly proportioned and finely detailed than those of its neighbors. The piers of the Gage are more elongated than those of the Ascher and Keith buildings and terminate at the top in capitals of luxuriant floral ornament. These elaborate outbursts of ornament at the top of the building provide an energy that animates the perfectly balanced facade. Terra-cotta ornament also adorns the spandrels, and the ground floor was originally framed by elaborate cast-iron ornament. The ornament was detailed by George Grant Elmslie, Sullivan's chief draftsman beginning in 1894. The ironwork was modeled in clay by Kristian Schneider and cast in iron by Winslow Brothers Iron Works, which executed much of Sullivan's ornamental cast iron. This ground-floor facade was also "modernized" in 1952, but fortunately the cast-iron panels were salvaged and are today in the collections of museums and universities throughout the country, including The Art Institute of Chicago.

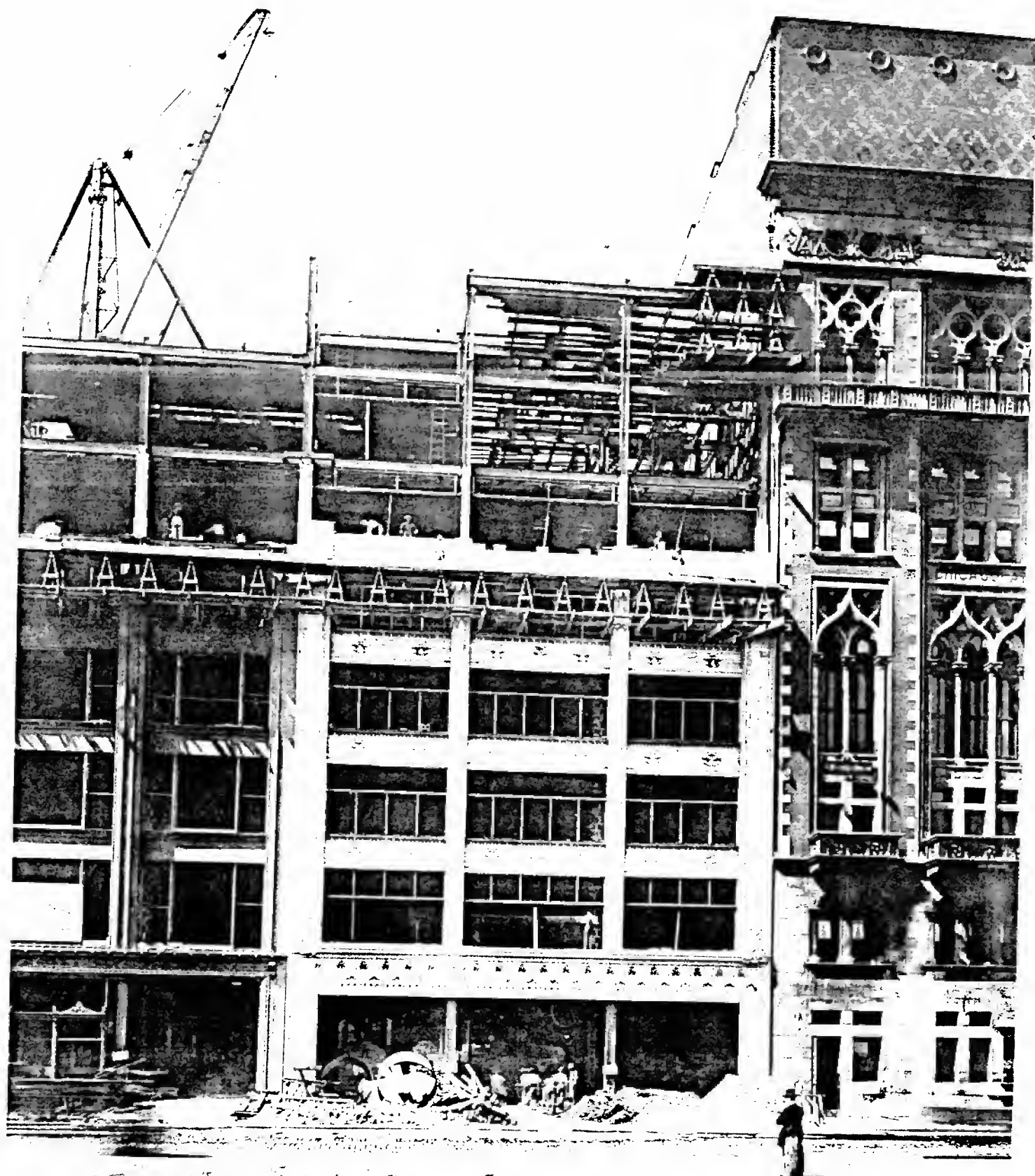
The Gage Building is three bays wide. Casement windows originally filled the bays: a series of five occupied the central bay and the two flanking bays each had four. Across the top of each group of windows was a four-foot-high band of translucent Luxfer prisms. These are glass tiles that have one side formed into prisms so that light passing through them is evenly diffused throughout the interior space. Sullivan's critics thought that this was mere ornamentation and that it reduced the amount of natural light needed for interior spaces where intricate handiwork was done. Actually, direct sunlight is often too strong for exacting needlework, a fact demonstrated in early photographs of the Gage Group where the shades are half drawn. Sullivan's use of Luxfer prisms was actually a compromise between admitting the necessary amount of light and admitting too brilliant a glare, according to Sullivan's biographer Hugh Morrison. Bands of double-hung windows now fill these openings.

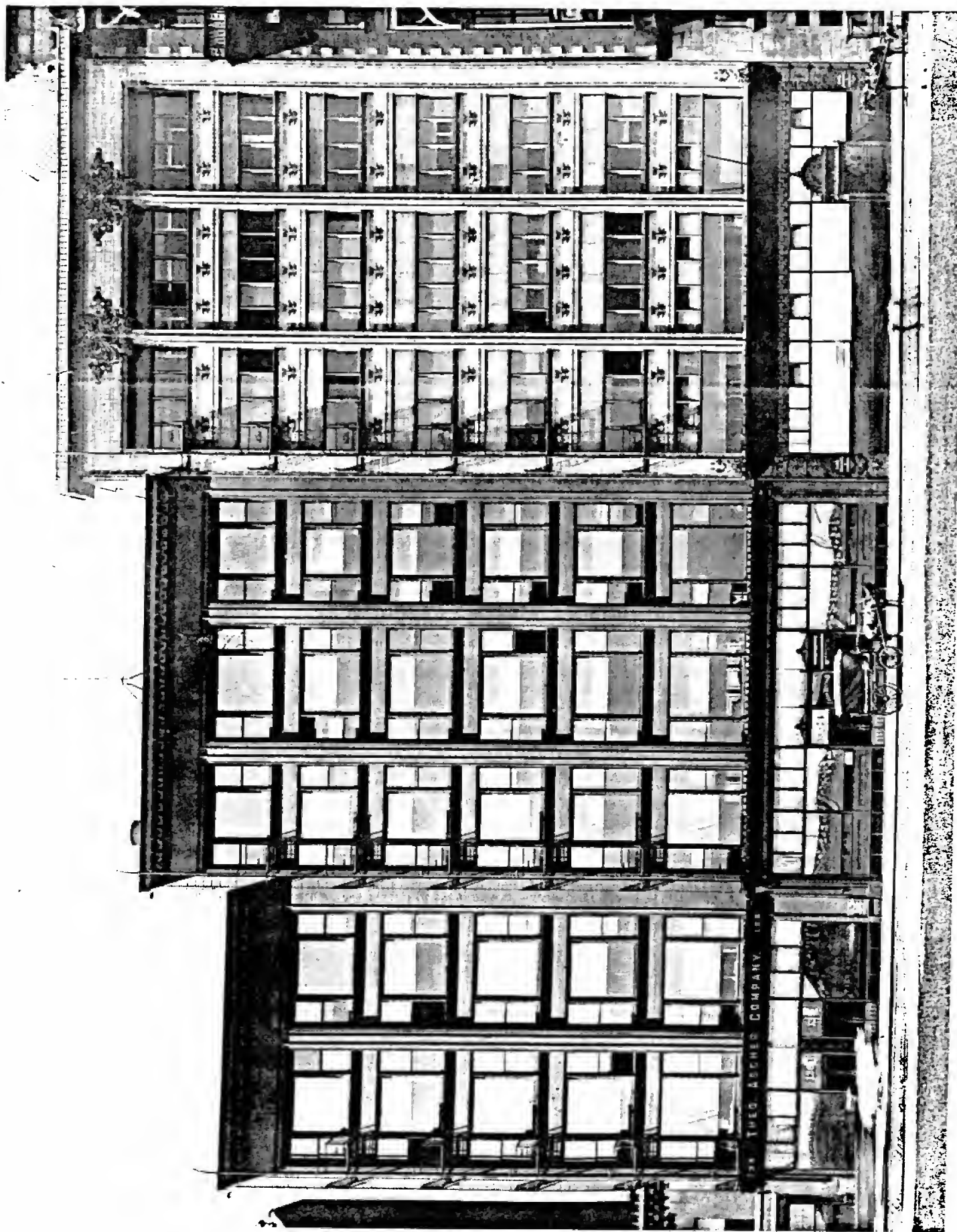
In 1902, the Gage company purchased its building from McCormick and decided to add four stories. The commission went to Holabird and Roche who decided to continue Sullivan's original design. The top of the building with its ornamental capitals was removed and later replaced atop the four new stories.

Sullivan's achievement in the Gage Building was important for many of his subsequent designs. Every vestige of the forms appropriate to bearing-wall construction has been eliminated from the Gage facade which becomes a handsomely proportioned screen that reflects the cellular nature of the supporting frame. Although some observers have

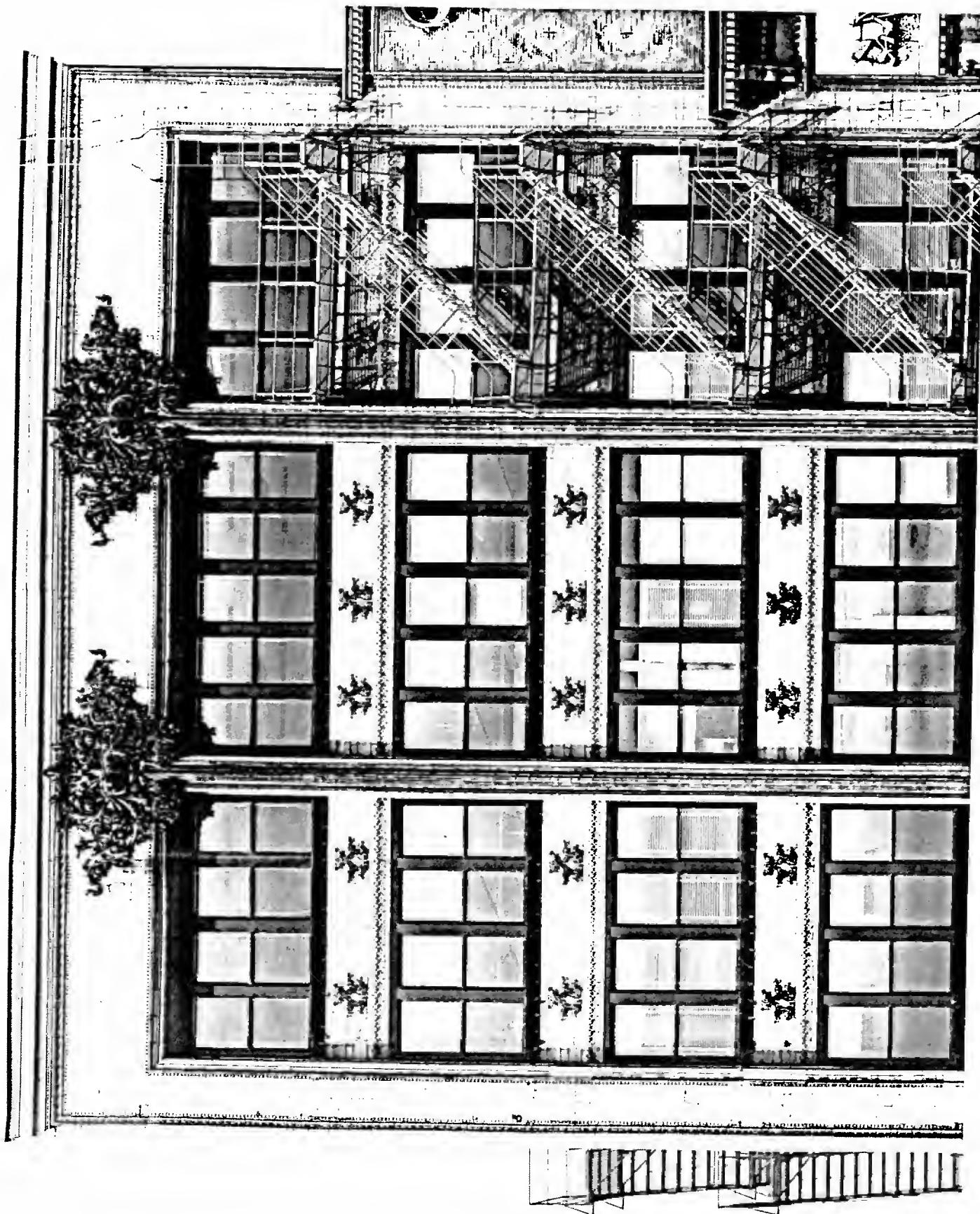
found the Gage ornament “arbitrary” and “over-exuberant,” it represents a major step toward the superb integration of ornament with overall form that Sullivan achieved in his later works.

The three buildings of the Gage Group provide adjacent examples of two aspects of the Chicago school tradition: the structuralist approach of Holabird and Roche which achieved a straightforward expression of skeleton-frame construction and the expressionist approach of Louis Sullivan which endowed the form of the early skyscraper with poetic and transcendantly human meaning.









The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



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